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Spy Charges Spur Plans to Tighten Pentagon Security

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WASHINGTON—The Pentagon said it will reduce the number of people with security clearances and take other steps in the wake of the disclosure of an alleged naval espionage operation involving accused spy John Walker.

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, in a memo to top Pentagon officials, said the reduction is designed "to eliminate what I perceive to be a security vulnerability—too many persons are cleared and being cleared who do not have a need for access to classified information." The number of existing security clearances in the Pentagon and the defense industry will be cut 10% by October.

To ensure that fewer new clearances are given, Mr. Weinberger also ordered a 10% reduction next year in the number of requests for background investigations, which are needed before security clearances can be authorized.

Among other actions, he ordered the creation of a commission to review and evaluate overall security practices and said the department would try to reduce substantially the number of documents designated secret or top secret and the number of copies that are produced.

At the same time, Navy Secretary John Lehman, in a news briefing, said the Navy would move rapidly toward a 50% reduction in its security clearances. He said about 900,000 of the slightly more than one million naval personnel currently have such clearance. Mr. Lehman also ordered Navy commanders to tighten security procedures by taking such actions as conducting random security checks and centralizing the granting of security clearances.

"We can certainly do better in the Navy than we've been doing," he told reporters.

The alleged espionage operation came to light last month with the arrest of John Walker, a retired Navy chief warrant officer; his brother, Arthur, also a retired officer; his son, Michael, a Navy yeoman; and Jerry Whitworth, a friend and ex-Navy man.

Adm. James Watkins, chief of naval operations, appearing with Mr. Lehman, told reporters that the Soviets have made "a very valuable intelligence gain" from the information they received about Navy communications, but that very little information about weapons was compromised. Information in such areas as air warfare, anti-ship warfare and anti-submarine warfare, he added, "filled important voids in their bank of knowledge."

But, he asserted that much of the information the Soviets received over nearly a 20-year period was "perishable," and that "there is no indication that the Soviets have broken the code of how to detect" U.S. ballistic missile submarines. He called the overall damage "very serious" but said it wasn't "catastrophic."

Retired Adm. Gene La Rocque, a frequent critic of the Reagan administration's defense policy, said the call for a commission to review security was "window dressing to satisfy the public." He said the Navy should convene a court of inquiry under military law that would have independence from Pentagon officials and the power to subpoena military personnel to conduct a meaningful investigation.